

The Quiet Retooling of the Militia Movement



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Introduction

Thought by many to have been in decline, right-wing militia groups in the United States have experienced a growth in activity in recent months that indicates a quiet attempt to revive the anti-government movement. These “new” militia groups operate more quietly and train more intensely than their 1990s counterparts, and have new, post-September 11 versions of the “New World Order” conspiracy theories that motivated their predecessors.

The militia movement burst onto the scene in 1994, in the wake of deadly standoffs at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992 and Waco, Texas, in 1993. It garnered great publicity following the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 (with which it was erroneously linked). At its peak, the movement had hundreds of groups and thousands of members.

However, the movement began to decline in the late 1990s, as some members dropped out in the wake of numerous militia-related arrests and others left the movement because it wasn’t radical enough. The non-event of Y2K – predictions that a series of technology failures would cripple the U.S. economy at the turn of the millennium – further spurred the movement’s decline, as militia members had heavily invested in Y2K conspiracy theories. The movement continued to be fairly active in some parts of the country, such as the Midwest, but elsewhere significantly declined.

With signs of growing activity in recent months, active groups or cells in at least 30 states, and continuing criminal incidents, the militia movement has proven that it deserves increased scrutiny. Ironically, efforts by the U.S. to fight foreign terrorism may have the side effect of spurring increased resentment and growth among domestic extremist groups.

Renewed Activity

The more recent resurgence of activity has attracted little attention, in part because militia activists generally keep a much lower profile than they did in the 1990s, when militia-related Web sites and public meetings were more common. Militia activists still use the Internet, but tend to prefer the lower-profile arenas of online discussion forums and mailing lists over Web sites.

Using these technologies, militia activists have increasingly begun to connect with each other and seek recruits. In June 2004, for example, the East Central Mississippi Militia, based near Meridian, Mississippi, posted a message asking for “like minded folks to be part of a mutual aid group, and possibly join our unit.” The group would meet for training, shooting, and “to build the group’s trust/cohesiveness.”

This lack of trust – because of fear of federal informants as well as fear of nongovernmental “watchdog” groups – governs many modern-day militia interactions.

After the Champaign County Unorganized Militia in Ohio was publicly identified in early 2004 as an active “patriot” group, one member of the group who frequented a Maine militia discussion board posted that “I would understand if you rather me not come to the board. Just ask. I don't know if I'm being watched or not. It's up to you guys. I think I'll go make sure I have the Mavrick [sic; a gun] ready.”

When a Desoto County, Mississippi, militia member responded to a request for information about nearby militias, he welcomed people to “come our way,” but only “after a little check out.” Another militia activist warned, “some of us ‘old’ folks are very cautious about meeting ‘new’ folks.”

Ideology

Much of what agitates the “new” militia movement is a post-September 11, 2001 fear of conspiracies and government power. Like many on the far-right and far-left fringes of American politics, these militia members tend to view the “war on terrorism” as a war directed at themselves, not foreign terrorists like Osama Bin Laden, and consider anti-terrorism measures such as the “Patriot Act” merely a prelude to mass gun confiscation and martial law.

When one West Virginia militia member learned of a scheduled Marine Corps urban training in Morgantown, West Virginia, in the spring of 2004, he posted to a militia message board that, “This is training for door to door searches of civilian homes. I can't help but think this is training for gun confiscation. I am not too happy about it happening in my home town, but I have no control. If this is training for Iraq, then what is the war in Iraq training for? Large scale gun confiscation.”

Such attitudes, especially a sense that time is running out, are common. Jack Keck of the South Carolina Minutemen wrote in February 2004 that “the time is at hand for what can and must be done. Big brother is stripping us of our rights daily and we all know what is coming and what we must do.”

Similarly, James Michael of New Hampshire announced in January 2004 that “my friends and I have formed a cell. After many months of working together on other causes, we have desided [sic] to begin our own group here in Wakefield, New Hampshire republic. We have searched our hearts and prayed, and have decided we can wait no more...We are small in number now, but I think others will join with a [sic] organized unit to join ranks with.”

Recruitment

Despite distrust and suspicion, many militia activists are willing to reveal themselves to the extent necessary for recruitment:

- **Texas:** A Brazoria County, Texas, group, the South Texas Light Infantry, described themselves in one recruiting message as a “group of concerned citizens who feel the need to prepare for an economic collapse caused either by terrorism abroad or within the USA, or a piss poor leadership of our Country. We have lost many of our God Given Rights and see a bad moon rising.” Enough interest in joining militia groups emerged in 2004 to cause Texas militia activists to create a new Web site, the Modern Minuteman, “dedicated to helping militia units and potential members to initiate contact.” By June 2004, 20 militia groups from 12 states had provided contact information. With such attitudes, activists in “new” militia groups seek recruits in settings ranging from gun shows to the Internet.
- **Tennessee:** In March 2004, “The newly founded 1st Tennessee Volunteer Militia,” announced that one of its members, George Keller, “is looking for people of like mind here in the middle Tennessee area. Please feel free to contact us...” Only a month before, Keller had unsuccessfully sought to find an already existing militia unit in the area.
- **Washington:** A Washington state militia activist announced the creation of the Grays Harbor Militia in Hoquiam around the same time, to “protect our familys [sic] and friends in a time of unrest...So far we are small but like all militias growing.”
- **Florida:** In Florida, the militia movement had virtually disappeared after the turn of the millennium. By 2004, however, activists were trying to revive it, and not only in Lee County. In a Texas militia publication, one south Florida militia member noted that “there are people in the Dade-Broward County area that view us as gun nuts, terrorists, and just plain creepy.” However, he had a plan to remedy matters: “I believe that if we start banding together that we can create a network of fellow minded patriots...it could greatly help out our cause. Field Training Exercises would be secluded...Land would become available and we wouldn’t have to train as lone wolf or two manned squad units.”
- **West Virginia:** Other states where the militia movement had previously collapsed have also been seeing renewed interest. In West Virginia, militia activity melted away after the 1996 arrests and convictions of a number of West Virginia Mountaineer Militia members in connection with an attempt to destroy an FBI fingerprinting facility. By 2004, however, interest began to resurface. In response to the April USMC training, the West Virginia Militia announced that they were “planning for it.” The West Virginia Militia would not be hostile, it said, “but will not be friendly either...Unpredictable? You bet!”

- **South Carolina:** In South Carolina, the militia movement also began to reorganize. In March 2004, J. P. Keck of the South Carolina Minutemen Corps announced that “we are currently looking to expand and regroup. We have a great core that stands for what we all feel is the right things [sic] and are not radicals. We would appreciate any people interested in joining or looking to advise in the rebuilding of this great core of men and women.”

Training

Many recruitment efforts center on invitations to attend militia trainings. In June 2004, a Florida militia organizer began inviting people to attend an upcoming November militia training in Lee County: “We only ask that you are a USC law bidding [sic] citizen. No nut cases.”

To what extent these “new” militia groups have been successful in attracting adherents is open to debate. However, at least some have seen a certain amount of success.

- **Washington:** The Washington State Militia announced in March 2004 that “due to the unexpected influx of new recruits recently, a multi-Battalion decision has been made to divide the training program for the 42nd Field Force into two halves: north and south. The dividing line...will be the state capital of Olympia.” The group organized frequent trainings in 2004, and also formed a “Pacific Northwest Militia Coalition,” claiming (almost certainly untruthfully) “several dozen” militia groups as members.

Militia paramilitary trainings range from target shooting to elaborate training exercises, with tremendous variation depending on the groups involved. Overall, there appears to be a greater emphasis on paramilitary training in the “new” militia groups than in many of the militia groups that emerged in the mid-1990s. Perhaps not surprisingly, some of the 1990s-era groups that have survived the longest, such as the Michigan Militia and the Kentucky State Militia, are those that place an emphasis on paramilitary training. Such paramilitary training is not uncommon among “hardcore” militia units.

One east Texas militia member described a May 2004 militia training:

We met and saddled up at 0830. Hand signal class was conducted; this is a refresher class that we perform so everyone is on the ball. We then ran a class going over the basic ambush drills. We covered Linear (line), L shaped, Z shaped, T (X) shaped, area ambush, closed triangle, and open triangle. We had a spirited discussion on the types of ambushes our unit would pull, due to size and terrain. Next up were actual ambush patrols. Since the group is small we had one dummy patrol, and one ambush patrol. The purpose of this exercise was to set up ambushes and pull them off, this way we become familiar with the drills and get some experience of actually

sitting in an ambush and maintaining noise discipline. Next on the list was a gear check. We went thru 1st, 2nd, and 3rd line. After check we mounted up 3rd line gear and conducted a patrol of a road and an enemy held installation. After successful patrol we debriefed and headed for home.

Coordination Among Groups

Some militia activists have proven willing to organize events more public than trainings. "Rev. Lt. Colonel" Mike Strauss of the Indiana Militia Corps, for example, scheduled a "Northern Indiana Preparedness Expo" for the fall of 2004; such expos are akin to trade fairs for survivalists, militia groups, and similarly minded people.

However, the "new" militias have been much more reluctant than their 1990s counterparts to engage in high-profile public activities that might bring significant media or law enforcement scrutiny. When some militia activists formed the Constitutional Rights Enforcement & Support Team (CREST) as a "mutual defense pact," others were wary.

Explained one CREST organizer, "The larger mainstream patriot groups didn't want anything to do with a group that would resort to the use of force to defend their rights. I don't know what our forefathers would think about that." As a result, CREST had to "tone things down a bit" and reinvent themselves as a "last resort second amendment defense group." In other words, explained the organizer, "our purpose will be to be prepared for the day that an order is given to confiscate all firearms from civilians."

Still, despite softening its message a bit, CREST's organizers have left no doubt about its willingness to use force: "Many of you are ready and there are some small groups that are ready to go on the offensive when that order is given. There will be pockets of resistance here and there but there is no large scale plan to collectively defend our [2nd Amendment rights]. It doesn't matter what you call the organization or who starts it but it is a necessity and the CREST does meet that need."

CREST's organizers boasted in 2004 that its Internet Yahoo group had over 820 subscribers, with over 100 active militia members.

Other attempts to form umbrella or coordinating groups, or revive those from the 1990s such as the Southeastern Alliance or the Third Continental Congress, have had less success. In December 2003, William Flatt, a "major general" with the Indiana Militia Corps and "interim Secretary of Defense to the 3rd Continental Congress," issued a call for militia groups to join the Congress. Three months later, only five groups had endorsed the Congress.

In February, Flatt issued another call to arms. The time for games, he warned, was over: "Patriot Acts 1 & 2 are here. More big brother government is on the way, and unless the Bilderbergers change their mind, they have already selected the next President of the

USSA, John Kerry...If you are completely, deadly serious about restoring freedom, I need to hear from you..." Despite such entreaties, however, Flatt received little support.

One of the most significant failures was the collapse of the "Mutual Defense Pact Militia," started by Colorado militia activist Rick Stanley. Member groups and individuals pledged to go to the aid of any members assailed by the government. However, Stanley was arrested in late 2003 on charges of threatening judges and failure to appear in court (he was later convicted). Alabama militia leader Floyd Shackleford took over the reins, but resigned in November 2003 after the MDPM was actually asked to intervene in a standoff situation in Maine and the MDPM collapsed.

Other joint militia ventures have also proven unsuccessful. In March 2004, a T. B. Hall of the "Sons of Indiana Unorganized Militia" issued a press release announcing "Operation Moses," which basically threatened armed protests or even civil war if Congress did not give in to its demands to have open hearings to "restore the republic." The announcement caused a stir in militia circles, but few rushed to support the plan, and Hall eventually called it off the following month to support CREST instead.

However, some militia groups have engaged in cooperation in recent months with other extremist groups, in particular with groups like Ranch Rescue, a Texas-based anti-immigration group that specializes in conducting armed vigilante border patrols along the border with Mexico. Militia members from Missouri and Kentucky, including the Kentucky State Militia, have participated in Ranch Rescue "operations" in Arizona. Other militia members have stayed away from such activities, fearing adverse publicity or even arrest.

Arrests, Convictions and Other Recent Activities

Since the militia movement began in 1994, militia-related arrests and convictions have been common. Most involved illegal weapons or explosives charges, or related conspiracy charges. Even as the number of militia groups declined in the 1990s, the level of militia-related arrests remained constant.

Several significant militia-related arrests have occurred:

- **June 2004.** Michigan militia members Jeffrey Thomas Horvath and Donald Joseph Koshmider were arrested on weapons charges in connection with what prosecutors claimed was a plot to attack police in retaliation for the shooting of Scott Allen Woodring in 2003. A third suspect, Norman David Somerville, had been arrested the previous fall on drug and weapons charges.
- **May 2004.** Tracy Brockway, the last of six members of the Project 7 militia from Flathead County, Montana, to be indicted on federal weapons charges, was arrested in Atlanta. Brockway had earlier received a suspended 10-year sentence after pleading guilty to harboring a fugitive militia leader, David Burgert (later

convicted on weapons charges). Authorities alleged that the group was plotting to kill local judges and law enforcement officers. Others indicted include Larry Chezem, Steven N. Morey, James R. Day, and John W. Slater.

- **May 2004.** In Tyler, Texas, William J. Krar received an 11 year sentence in federal prison after pleading guilty to possessing a deadly weapon; his companion, Judith Bruey, received a lesser sentence on a related conspiracy charge. An anti-government extremist originally from New Hampshire, Krar had ties to militia and anti-government groups in that state before moving to Texas, where he amassed an arsenal of more than 100,000 rounds of ammunition, more than 60 pipe bombs, machine guns, and a sodium cyanide bomb. The investigation that led to Krar's arrest in 2003 began after fake IDs Krar had manufactured for a New Jersey militia member were accidentally delivered to the wrong address.
- **March 2004.** Darrell W. Sivik, active in the Pennsylvania Citizens' Militia and the Bucktail Militia, was arrested on weapons charges for allegedly purchasing an illegal machine gun from an undercover officer so that he would not have to register it with the government. Also arrested was George Bilunka, head of the Christian American Patriot Survivalists.
- **July 2003.** Michigan Militia member Scott Allen Woodring killed a Michigan State Police officer during a standoff at Woodring's home. Woodring escaped from his surrounded residence during the night, but four days later was killed in a confrontation with police after they were tipped off as to his whereabouts.